

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 023

CS 208 067

AUTHOR Lawrence, Robert A.
TITLE Making Connections between Speaking and Writing.
PUB DATE Oct 83
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Writing Centers Conference (Iowa City, IA, October 21-22, 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; Developmental Programs; Higher Education; *Integrated Activities; Oral Language; *Oral Reading; Prior Learning; Speech Instruction; *Speech Skills; Teaching Methods; *Verbal Ability; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Skills; Written Language
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; Freshman Composition; *Speaking Writing Relationship

ABSTRACT

By emphasizing the similarities between writing and speaking, writing instructors can help students generate coherent, natural sounding prose. Instructors can point out the connections between speaking and writing by (1) reading good student writing aloud, (2) having students read their work aloud in class, (3) encouraging students to develop sensitivity to the sound of their writing through reading aloud to themselves or reading into a tape recorder, (4) developing purposeful class discussions as part of prewriting activities, (5) having students give oral tellings in class, (6) assigning writing emphasizing the writer's audience, and (7) performing student dramatic works. (MM)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SPEAKING AND WRITING

by Robert A. Lawrence

SPEAKING VS. WRITING

Once during a commercial break from the evening news, a silhouette of parent and child appeared on the TV screen, and a soothing voice relayed a message as follows:

If your child comes home from school and tells you a lively and interesting story, tell him or her to write it out just the way he or she told it to you. Making connections between speaking and writing makes better writers.

I don't recall what organization sponsored the message, but I do recall my reaction, amazement and delight: Here on a major commercial network — during the evening news no less — is a sound principle in the teaching of writing; perhaps common sense is reaching the curriculum makers of our nation after all.

Our theme, then, is connecting speaking and writing. Students entering freshman or developmental composition bring a wealth of experience in the substance of the course, the English language. For years they have been generating complete sentences in the ongoing effort to communicate ideas and feelings to others. At moments in their lives, they have spoken with eloquence and power; as the little TV ad indicates, there's a touch of the storyteller in all of us. By drawing upon students' experience with the spoken language, we can make the teaching of writing skills an easier task.

Instructors, however, tend to be acutely aware of the differences between speaking and writing (so well known that they need no elaboration here). Years of analyzing sentences, analyzing poems, writing out exams, and typing papers not only magnify the differences between speaking and writing but also distort their respective values, greatly overemphasizing

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert A. Lawrence

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED238023

CS 208067

the latter. Linguists tell us otherwise:

Granted the practical importance of writing, it does not follow that written messages deserve to be treated with more reverence than oral ones. Oral communication is even more important than writing, which is still only a secondary representation of language.¹

In truth, speaking and writing share profound similarities. A speaker and a writer both use language to convey meaning to an audience. They use the same lexicon and, with minor variations, the same syntactic structures. Written punctuation reflects the pauses we make while speaking (not vice-versa). Metaphor, simile, personification, etc. — the spice of the essay — are figures of speech. (They were invented by poets, storytellers and songwriters long before writing came into being.)

While writing tends to be more formal, both languages exhibit a wide range of diction. A friendly letter is likely to be less formal than a political speech or even the statements of an applicant on a job interview. Writing, furthermore, achieves an effective rhythm when it approaches the natural rhythm of speech:

All spoken language, no matter who the speaker may be or what his subject is, has a natural rhythm. You will hear this rhythm whenever you hear talk: in your best friend's conversation, in a salesman's pitch, in a math teacher's explanation of a problem, in an impromptu speech at a club meeting, in your father's reading of the riot act. . . . The first principle of rhythm in writing, to capture the basic rhythm of speech, is variation of sentence length.² (Italics in the text.)

Stressing the differences between speaking and writing has a negative effect upon the developing writer. The student loses sight of the fact that a piece of writing is an act of communication between himself and an audience. Instead, writing degenerates into a matter

of fashioning marks on a page in accordance with a set of formulas (five paragraph essay, nine sentence paragraph, no there's, no you's, and all the rest). Its purpose is to avoid a parade of red marks and receive a passing grade. Unfortunately, the parade usually keeps marching on. Cut off from the rhythm of spoken language, prose becomes awkward and unnatural; sentences and whole passages lapse into incoherence. And never does the student think to read his work aloud.

A familiar scene from the Learning Assistance Center illustrates the above process . . . Working with a student on an essay, a tutor comes across a sentence or passage that is incoherent. "What were you trying to say here?" The student explains quite clearly. "Why don't you write down what you just told me?" The student answers with a look of disbelief: writing and talking are supposed to be different — writing is what you find in books — it's not like talking — is it?? "When you write something," explains the tutor, "make it clear and understandable, just as if you were trying to explain something to a listener. Read your papers out loud at home — pretend you're giving a speech to the class. If you hear something that doesn't sound right, then change it so it does."

Making connections between speaking and writing has a positive effect. By tying into the student's capability to generate spoken sentences in a natural rhythm and by turning audience from a word into a reality, we further the development of coherent, grammatical prose. When we acknowledge verbal abilities instead of disparage them, we build confidence — and our students need confidence. Finally, we encourage that elusive quality called voice. To quote writing authority

Peter Elbow:

In your natural way of producing sounds there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm — a voice — which is the main source of power in your writing. I don't know how it works, but this voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you, the energy that drives the meanings through his thick skull. Maybe you don't like your voice; maybe people have made fun of it. But it's the only voice you've got. It's your only source of power. You better get back into it, no matter what you think of it. If you keep writing in it, it may change into something you like better. But if you abandon it, you'll likely never have a voice and never be heard.³

MAKING CONNECTIONS

This section is addressed to freshman and developmental composition instructors.

You can accomplish the important goal of connecting speaking and writing in a number of ways.

****First and foremost, read good student writing aloud to the entire class.** Right then and there the written word is transformed into the spoken, the class into an audience.

Reading student work aloud is a powerful motivator. I once asked a friend what he remembered from his freshman comp class (some 20 years earlier). The first — and only — thing that came to his mind was how good he felt when the instructor read his essays aloud to the class. Students literally beam with pride when their work is read in class — I've seen it happen over and over. They gain confidence in their writing and in their class participation. And those listening have a real reason to try harder — "maybe my paper will be read to the class." Recently one of my students, a lineman on our football team, told me how he had stayed up until midnight working on a paper, how the paper was good, and how he hoped it would be read in class.

Students will enter a developmental composition class expecting you

to respond to their writing as you would to an acid stomach. You can tell them that, on the contrary, you respect their efforts, value their points of view, and even enjoy reading their papers. By reading their work aloud you show it; they can see it in your face, hear it in your voice. Their writing, instead of an abstract set of rules, becomes the focal point of the course — and this is the way it should be.

Even if my remarks on speaking and writing engender in you the desire to write an opposing monograph, read student work aloud in your composition classes. Don't underestimate the power of your approval or the students' need for recognition. You will still have ample opportunity, on an individual and class basis, to call for improvement and to define directions for that improvement.

There are some [^]ground rules for reading student writing in class:

- 1) Never read a paper aloud in order to knock it. Always read a paper as an example of something done well. Within this context, an occasional constructive criticism can be made, e.g. "The paper would be even stronger if you'd develop this section in more detail."
- 2) Spread around the positive feedback. Read something from every one in class as soon as you can; the weakest writer will come up with a small passage of worth.
- 3) Offer students the option to withhold a paper from being read aloud. I tell the class that I'll be reading their work aloud during the course of the semester, and if any piece is too personal just write "please do not read aloud" on the bottom of the page.
- 4) Don't read a piece if the author is not present. Do identify the author after the piece has been read. As the semester progresses, students will start to recognize the others' voices. You can ask the class, "Whose paper is this? Whose voice is this?"

Reading student writing aloud is not the easiest thing to do; a given piece might not sound as good as the instructor thought it would. But this minor risk is well worth the benefits. Moreover, in seeing which papers "read well," the instructor improves his/her own critical perceptiveness.

****Have students read aloud in class.**

I rarely single out a student to read an exemplary paper to the class. Instead I incorporate individual reading within the context of a group activity. I will ask all class members, or several volunteers, to read aloud. For example, I once received an outstanding set of events from a developmental composition section. "These are all good," I told the class. "There's not much point in having me sit up here and read all of them. So I'd like you to read them." There were a few groans, but soon the class got into it and everyone read. Journals are excellent for such readings; students tend to feel confident with this form of writing, and they have a wide selection of entries to choose from. Collaborative learning activities can also include oral readings.

Students need not read only their own work aloud. You can ask someone to read a key passage from an essay being discussed. When doing proofreading exercises in class, have students read aloud the sentences and paragraphs.

****Direct students to read their papers aloud at home — not just mumbling to themselves but out loud, as if they were addressing an audience. Actually reading to another person at home is preferable, but reading to oneself ("find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed") is acceptable.**

I relate the following true anecdote to my classes . . . A professional writer spoke to a writing class that I attended. A student asked him, "Based on your experience, what would you advise us to do to improve our own writing?" The writer replied, "There isn't much to say except keep writing — wait, yes, there's one thing: read your work out loud."

**Have students read their papers aloud into a cassette tape recorder, then play back the recording. This technique is especially effective for revising awkward sentences, which often go undetected in silent readings. "The student can then make changes in these sentences and immediately evaluate the revisions, since the recording provides an objective 'instant replay.'"⁴

**Conduct purposeful class discussions. Talking about something before writing about it yields an obvious connection between speaking and writing. Make the class aware that discussions are not bull sessions but a pre-writing activity that generates ideas and information.

**Utilize oral tellings. Here we hearken back to the TV ad: When a student relates a vivid story, tell him to write it up. You can structure oral tellings as part of the class. For instance, students can describe how to perform a particular process before writing up a how-to assignment.

**Be aware of voice in writing. "Good writing talks to you with a real voice; it has the recognizable imprint of the author in it."⁵ When a paper has a lively, individual style, when it is the honest expression of its author, then tell the student!

**Remind the class that their writing is an act of communication between them and an audience, the reader. Assign letters and essays written as letters to reinforce the sense of address.

**Assign pieces in dramatic form and "perform" some of them in class, with students acting as readers.

At this point you may feel that all of this sounds nice, but isn't tapping the students' speech patterns like dipping into a polluted well? John Schultz, inventor of the Story Workshop method of teaching writing, answers this doubt:

First, it is inaccurate to talk about writing "the way they speak." Rather we should say: Yes, they will write better-formed sentences if they're allowed to draw upon and build continuously and instinctively from the sentences they use in casual speech and when talking with peers, that is develop the powers of their speech and perception in the different potentials of writing, in close association with oral reading and silent reading. The following summation of research comes as a bemusing shock to teachers in the writing-across-the-curriculum and composition teacher-training seminars that I've conducted.

"Everyday speech," "casual speech," and "working-class speakers," according to William Labov's research, reveal proportionately more well-formed sentences than middle class or educated speech and speakers.⁶

Many forms and rules common to the classroom are ignored in the real world of writing: When was the last time you saw a five paragraph essay in a magazine or newspaper? But the principle of connecting speaking and writing remains valid. Here's what Rudolph Flesch, author of Say What You Mean, has to say:

The pros — magazine writers, newspapermen, novelists, people who write for a living — learned long ago that they must use "spoken" English and avoid "written" English like the plague. . . . talk to your reader. Pretend the person who'll read your letter or report is sitting across from you . . .

Composition instructors must still deal with variations between spoken and standard edited English; to claim otherwise would be naive. But we can make these variations the focus of our attention, or we can place them within a context that recognizes and utilizes the fundamental similarities between speaking and writing. For the reasons stated above, I feel the latter is a superior instructional strategy.

NOTES

¹Ronald W. Langacker, Language and its Structure (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), p. 59.

²Lucile Vaughn Payne, The Lively Art of Writing (New York: New American Library, 1969), pp. 106-7.

³Peter Elbow, "Freewriting," in Patterns of Exposition 6, ed. Randall E. Decker (Boston: Little Brown, 1969), p. 128. Elbow's essay is excerpted from his Writing Without Teachers.

⁴Gerald Siegel, "Aural Correction of Awkward Sentences," in Writing Exercises from Exercise Exchange, ed. Littleton Long (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976), p. 150.

⁵Dan Kirby and Tom Liner, Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981), p. 92.

⁶John Schultz, Writing from Start to Finish (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1982), p. 23.

⁷Ibid., p. 75.